



Book review: Chris Pallant and Christopher Holliday (eds.), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: New Perspectives on Production, Reception, Legacy*. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 328, ISBN: 9781501373961, pbk. £28.99.

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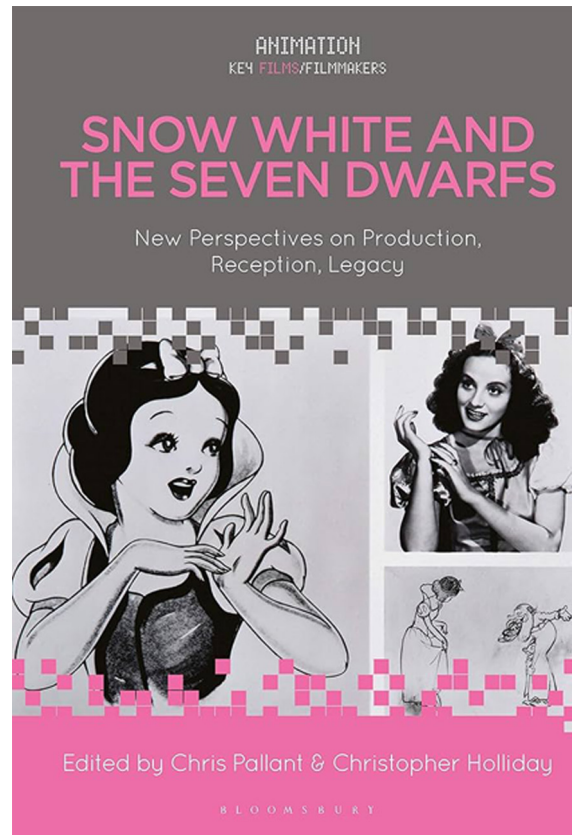


Love it or hate it – and it’s probably one or the other – it’s hard to ignore *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As Chris Pallant and Christopher Holliday remind us in the Introduction to this new collection of essays, Walt Disney’s first feature-length cartoon established a framework and touchstone for the subsequent history of animated film, both as production and object of scholarship. The influence of the film has also helped establish the ‘Disney formula’ (5) that would seem to make *Snow White* an embodiment of Disney’s commercial, aesthetic and ideological conservatism.

In recent decades, academic commentary has frequently focused on these latter notions, either from the standpoint of literary critics (Jack Zipes), or from a plethora of commentators adopting a ‘political economy’ approach (notably, Janet Wasko). Time, it is fair to say, has not always been kind either to *Snow White*, or to the now all-absorbing global media company behind it. As Pallant and Holliday in turn admit by taking their image from the Wicked Queen’s original fate in the Grimm fairy tale, choosing to reevaluate *Snow White* at this critical juncture is ‘like jumping “into burning coals”’ (1).

Happily no one, nor the reputation of Disney’s 1937 film, comes out burned by the experience. Pallant and Holliday’s wide-ranging and illuminating volume, which is part of Bloomsbury’s ‘Animation: Key Films/Filmmakers’ series, reclaims *Snow White* as a pioneering work: one whose reputation as Disney’s original ‘formulaic’ film has clouded the more complex story of how and why this formula came into being in the first place and why, more precisely, it *worked*. Hence the editors’ expressed desire, challenging some of the film’s wider critical reception, ‘to paint a more nuanced picture of the film’s enchanting spectral quality and to understand why its pleasures “haunt” critics, film history and the popular imagination’ (9).

Eschewing the more speculative theorising that has sometimes hampered discussions of Disney’s animated films, and following in the vein of studies such as Robin Allan’s *Walt Disney and Europe* (1999) or Pallant’s earlier *Demystifying Disney*



(2011), the editors have assembled an impressive series of detailed case studies from a variety of international perspectives. While the chapters range dramatically in their focus – from the influence on *Snow White* from German Expressionist cinema (Chapter One) to the film’s West Coast marketing campaign (Chapter Seven), to its adaptation histories in Spain and Turkey (Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen) – the volume is helpfully divided into three guiding sections. The first is on *Snow White*’s technological and aesthetic innovations, the second is on its contemporary significance and later legacy within Hollywood, and the final section deals with its wider impacts and legacies across international markets and cultures.

Across these diverse sections, a number of key concerns emerge: one being a willingness to question received ideas around Disney’s film. *Snow White* has often been seen as an example of Disney’s fixation with the natural world. Yet as Pallant and Holliday show in Chapter Three, these depictions of nature were rendered via Disney’s pioneering multiplane camera system: as such, these depictions were also deliberate manifestations of ‘highly technological, *man*-made spaces’, created specially as ‘a testing ground for [Disney’s] proprietary animation techniques’ (62). Meanwhile, Daniël Blitereyst (Chapter Thirteen) highlights the extent to which ‘Disney’s view [of] wild nature as fundamentally ambiguous’ (239) subjected the film to censorship in parts of Europe, but *not* the United States. In this revealing analysis, readers are offered a counter-example to the prevailing misconception that both Disney’s and Hollywood’s approaches were ‘[more] conservative or more restrictive than their European counterparts’ (232).

Other chapters focus on some of the film’s further innovations and impacts, beyond the more familiar discussion of its technological breakthroughs. Maarit Kalmakurki (Chapter Four) makes a case for the significance of *Snow White* to the longer study of costume design, within which animated films have been ‘underrepresented’ (80). Kalmakurki convincingly shows how important the consideration of costume was to Disney’s film, emphasising the vital role played by such design in the creation of compelling and comic animated characters. Taking a similarly revisionist approach, Sadeen Elyas’s marvellous study of *Snow White*’s musical soundtrack (Chapter Five) reveals how enterprising and anticipatory the film was in terms of integrating musical numbers in the action. But it also advanced the use of synchronised music as a form of ‘invisible character’, shaping other characters’ reactions and audience response (125). After reading Elyas’s eye- and ear-opening chapter, it’s hard both to see and hear *Snow White* in the same way again.

Just as welcome – and a counter to the type of cultural-imperialist readings that have sometimes coalesced around Disney studies in the past – is the volume’s emphasis on *Snow White*’s reworking within an international media context. Perhaps

surprisingly, there is no chapter on the film's influence on Japanese animation, an omission possibly due to the coverage some *anime* scholars have already granted the subject. Instead, we get essays exploring lesser known histories. Greg Philip and Sébastien Roffat's discussion of *Snow White*'s original reception in France (Chapter Eleven), where attitudes towards Disney have been mixed (to say the least), reveals a historical context of significant commercial and critical popularity. They also highlight how some of *Snow White*'s visual elements were amended for its release in France; one example being the conversion into French of English-language text appearing in the film, sometimes involving the reanimation of whole shots. Elsewhere, in a fascinating survey of the film's adventures in China (Chapter Ten) – from its appropriation into the worldly metropolis of 1930s Shanghai to its live-action remake and 'indigenization' in China's own first animated feature (1941's *Princess Iron Fan*) – Yuanyuan Chen shows how 'the context of globalization' (194) shaped film production and culture long before the word was properly coined and more than half a century before Disney would themselves seek to indigenize a Chinese story in *Mulan* (1998).

It is not a criticism but a compliment to Pallant and Holliday's collection that its focus is so widely spread. Indeed, it underlines the importance of taking polycentric approaches to its subject, disrupting largely Western, US-centric narratives. I would imagine the book proving indispensable to researchers looking into the history and theory of Disney; but its highly readable and wide-ranging approach also makes it accessible and valuable to any students of animation, or indeed to fans of the film wanting to know more about its production history and reception. The book, in short, demonstrates how much there is still to learn and talk about with regard to Disney's milestone work, whether or not you love it, or hate it.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

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